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EARMARKS: ARE THEY A PROBLEM OR A SOLUTION?

By Stephen L. Bakke  May 12, 2017



Earmarks: Are They a Problem or a Solution?

Have you ever seen more disgraceful partisanship and “headhunting” than what’s going on in our government? Nothing else is getting done!

Set aside this cute but sophomoric proclamation: “What’s wrong with gridlock in Washington? If they aren’t getting things done, they’re not spending my money!” I’m definitely guilty of having made declarations similar to that. But it’s time I get serious and acknowledge that I want a smooth-running government. It doesn’t have to be devoid of differences and debate, but should be one that leads eventually to results, even if no single party is totally happy and “victorious.” Those involved should at least feel somewhat successful, and be adequately satisfied to cooperate in dealing with the next legislative challenge.

While Obama had a very divisive influence on the country and government operations, he had a lot of bipartisan help from politicians. Rep. Tom Rooney, R-Florida is one legislator who believes the irreconcilable differences would be reduced if “legislative earmarks” were reinstated in some form. In 2010 the House Appropriations Committee implemented rules to ban earmarks because they “had become synonymous with pork-barrel spending and corruption,” according to then House Speaker John Boehner. If the process were reinstated, it would probably have a different name, new rules, and generally be less corruptible. Let’s take a closer look.

“Legislative earmarks” refers to the process of attaching spending allocation “instructions” to bills being passed. This leads to funds being allocated in a manner favoring certain states or legislative districts. Contrary to what I originally thought, the earmark moratorium hasn’t reduced spending because it’s apparent the same funds are being spent, but now federal bureaucrats are making the allocation decisions. Think about that. The transparency once available, even in the “earmarks” process, has disappeared. Some legislators once opposed to earmarks now admit the ban has made Washington much more dysfunctional. Legislators have lost some of their “purpose” – i.e. advocating for their constituents’ “piece of the pie.”

Some now consider the earmark process to be an important “tool” in the bargaining “toolbox.” Passing legislation was once just a “herculean task.” Now it’s often impossible because of gridlock. If something similar to earmarks were reinstated, legislators who might otherwise be irretrievably opposed to a bipartisan compromise, would then have an opportunity to “bring home some bacon” (i.e. local projects) to their constituents. It would give incentive for at least limited support and cooperation. That’s the way it used to work.

Some in Congress are quietly considering reinstating a modern version of earmarks. Should we conservatives support this effort, or would this go against the heart and soul of conservative policy making? Is this just refilling the swamp – something conservatives are fighting hard to drain? Do you think even discussing this is heresy?

But might we be closer to a bipartisan healthcare solution, or immigration reform, or tax reform, if we had better bargaining flexibility? Would a new and different form of earmarks facilitate the requisite cooperation?

These are interesting questions that we should start thinking about.